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**IDENTITY ISSUES IN THE THIRD GENERATION OF  
JAPANESE CANADIANS IN JOY KOGAWA'S NOVEL *OBASAN***

**BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

The importance of identity cannot be overstated. Strong identity allows for a person to feel safe and needed in their community. However, many people from immigrant communities face identity crisis at some point in their lives. By addressing these issues, it is possible to explore the complex mechanism of identity development. This thesis analyses Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* in an attempt to discover the main factors which influence the development of the identity of the third generation Japanese Canadians. It also aims to determine the reasons behind their identity crisis.

The thesis consists of four parts: the introduction, two chapters (literature review, and empirical part), and the conclusion. The introduction provides general information about the thesis. It states the research questions and explains the necessity of this research. It also provides an overview of the novel's plot.

The first chapter is a literature review, which explains the background for understanding the issues presented in the thesis. It also provides information on the Japanese culture, the history of Japanese Canadians, conflicts between generations, and the effect of traumatic events.

The second chapter concentrates on analysing the novel. It explores the main factors which affected the identity development of the third generation Japanese Canadians. This includes the effects of society, their relationship with the older generations and silence.

The conclusion summarises the findings of the thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

An awareness of one's identity is one of the key factors of living a fulfilling life, but not everybody has made sense of their true self. Many people who find themselves in a new society, especially the second and the third generation immigrants, suffer from an identity crisis. In the globalising world, the issue of identity has become unprecedentedly prominent. This topic is often featured in literature, and it allows readers to gain an insight into the troublesome lives of people, who face an identity crisis. *Obasan*, written by Joy Kogawa, concentrates on the traumatic experiences, and identity issues of Japanese Canadians.

The protagonist of *Obasan* is Naomi, who in the narrative present of the novel works as a schoolteacher. She has a brother Stephen, who is a professional musician. They are the third generation Japanese immigrants. Naomi and Stephen have suffered from an identity crisis for their whole lives. Due to the internment of the Japanese during the Second World War, they were mostly raised by Obasan and Uncle Sam, who are the first generation immigrants. Naomi and Stephen's mother was disfigured due to the bombing of Nagasaki and their father was sick. They were also influenced by Aunt Emily, the sister of their mother. These two different generations have very different views, and therefore influenced the development of the third generation's identity in various ways. After the horrible death of the mother, adults are traumatised, and agree not to reveal the details to Naomi and Stephen. During a typical day in school, Naomi finds out that her uncle has passed away. This event sets the identity crisis of the third generation in motion. In an attempt to make sense of her identity, and what happened to her mother, Naomi's mind starts to constantly wander into the past.

*Obasan* is a novel dealing with the period of the internment of Japanese Canadians, cultural differences, trauma, silence, and identity. The novel enables the reader to see the

world through the eyes of a child and follow their development throughout the narrative. It incorporates historical facts into fiction.

Joy Kogawa is a Japanese Canadian author. She has written numerous poetry collections and three novels. *Obasan* is her first novel. Due to being interned during the Second World War, she finds it important to address the hardship of Japanese Canadians. Her main concerns as an author are the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, issues of identity, justice, tolerance, and trauma.

In my thesis I am going to explore the identity issues of the third generation in the novel. I will concentrate on the most important aspects which influence the development of identity and analyse how certain events in the novel affected Naomi and Stephen's identity. By analysing the novel I am going to answer the following questions: How do Naomi and Stephen identify themselves and what are the main factors in the development of their identity? Why are Naomi and Stephen's identities divergent, even though they are from the same generation?

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is affected by numerous aspects. It is something rather individual and varies from person to person. People of the same ethnicity or nationality often identify themselves differently. This is also the case in the third generation immigrants in *Obasan*. For the purpose of fully mapping the issues which are connected to the aspect of identity in *Obasan*, it is necessary to explore the background and thoughts of different scholars regarding the topic.

### 1.1. Historical Background of Japanese Immigrants in Canada

Every nation has a distinct history and a nation's identity is closely connected to the events which have taken place in the near or distant past. The events taking place in *Obasan* are undoubtedly affected by the historical background of the Japanese immigrants in Canada. Even though the action in the novel is constantly changing back and forth between the 1940's and the 1970's, the earlier periods in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are also important for the protagonist's family. Furthermore, the characters in the novel are constantly haunted by the historical events that have directly influenced their actions and their development throughout the storyline.

Japanese immigration to Canada in the modern times began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before July 1, 1896 the official statistics of the arriving Japanese were not recorded, nevertheless, the numbers of immigrants started to become more noticeable after 1885. Most of the immigrants were lower class workers, who aimed to improve their economic status. (Adachi 1979: 13) Early immigrants usually had no intention of settling in Canada permanently, neither did the majority of them speak English. They were often taken care of by a certain leader, who aided them in finding employment. (Adachi 1979: 29) This meant that the

assimilation progress was rather slow. However, it has been stated that their assimilation was not slower when compared to other immigrant groups in Canada (Broadfoot 1977: 8).

Ken Adachi (1979: 38) notes that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, British Columbia tried to maintain British heritage, and therefore immigrants, especially Asian immigrants were frowned upon. These views were dominant throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the first half. Adachi (1979: 63) also calls attention to the fact that Anti-Oriental Riots of 1907 were especially critical. This resulted in Japan to restrict the number of issued passports, which decreased the number of male Japanese immigrants entering the country, but the number of female Japanese immigrants increased dramatically (Adachi 1979: 83). Unfortunately, the increase of Japanese Canadian children created even more tensions (Adachi 1979:83). Broadfoot (1977: 15) points out that this brought about noticeably large Japanese communities, and also ghettoisation.

The Second World War was probably the most influential event in terms of the life of Japanese Canadians. During that period, the Japanese Canadians were seen as a national threat and very often irrational action was taken. For example, about 1200 fishing boats were impounded from Canadian citizens of Japanese origin (Adachi 1979: 200), regardless of the boats being used for fishing. Many of the Japanese were relocated on the excuse of security reasons (Adachi 1979: 218-219). On the other hand, it is claimed that a considerable amount of Japanese Canadians were favouring Japan in the Second World War (Broadfoot: 1977: 61). Nevertheless, this does not justify the massive internment, which took place during that period. Donald C. Goellnicht (1989: 288-289) mentions that in 1942 more than 21,000 Japanese Canadians (the majority of them were Canadian citizens) were forced to move to Hasting Park in Vancouver and many from there to abandoned mining towns. In 1944 14,000 Japanese Canadians had to choose between moving to east of the Rockies or going to Japan, even though, many of them were born in Canada. This resulted in Japanese-Canadians to be

dispersed all around Canada, where they aimed to assimilate into the Canadian dominant culture (Goellnicht 1989: 289). It is claimed that the main purpose of *Obasan* is to show that the hardship of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War was caused by false beliefs and paranoia within the society (Goellnicht 1989:290).

The situation of Japanese Canadians improved at only some aspects after the war. Adachi (1979: 348) notes that during 1946-1960 more than 2 million immigrants entered Canada, but only 1449 were Japanese. On the other hand, Japanese Canadians were given the right to vote in 1949 (Adachi 1979: 344). It is also noted that in the 1970's the internment and discrimination of Japanese Canadians became a major topic in the society (Adachi 1979: 367-370).

## **1.2. Attitudes of the Canadian Society to the Japanese**

The characters in *Obasan*, and especially the third generation, had to put up with the negative attitudes to the Japanese residing in Canada. Due to their distinct appearance, Japanese Canadians were unable to remain unseen by white Canadians. This must have had a significant role in the development of the third generation characters' identity in the novel.

Meredith L. Shoenut (2006: 482) notes that the Japanese Canadians were seen as foreigners in their own country. They were not thought to be part of Canada and remained alien for a long period of time. Furthermore, Adachi (1979: 109) points out that even though Canadian identity has been always based on a blend of very different ethnicities, Japanese Canadians were not considered to be Canadian. Additionally, racial discrimination is present from the beginning to the end in the novel. Naomi's brother Stephen had to also put up with racism throughout his childhood, which caused him to grow hatred against his Japanese identity and eventually made him to abandon his roots (Shoenut 2006: 483). On the other hand, Aunt Emily always considered herself to be Canadian. Shoenut (2006: 485) argues



that due to the fact that white Canadians tend to force a false identity upon Japanese Canadians, they lose their identity.

Moreover, it is argued that even though Canada is a multicultural country, nationalism has been always present, and that ‘multiculturalism’ is a coverage to avoid further problems (Zwicker 2001: 148). The two predominant white ethnicities (French and British) have always dominated Canada (Zwicker 2001: 150). Lies made up by the government of British Columbia directly affected the Japanese Canadians, resulting in them to employ different strategies to cope with the situation (Snelling 1997: 24). Additionally, the Japanese Canadians started to become less patriotic, especially during the Second World War. This was both due to the repressions and the fact that there was no action taken within the dominant groups to improve the situation (Shoenut 2006: 492).

### **1.3. Conflicts between Immigrant Generations**

The third generation immigrants are considerably different from the first or the second generation immigrants. This is explained by a universal model of acculturation. As Mason Harris (1990: 41) points out, “the first, second, and third generations represent crucial stages in adjustment to the adopted culture.” However, the identity formation of the third generation immigrants can be disrupted by political developments, which is the case in *Obasan* due to the internment and dispersal of the Japanese Canadian community (Harris 1990: 43). As a result, they may be unable to identify themselves with any nation, and have to face identity crisis, like Naomi and Stephen. Special terms are used in Japanese culture for each generation: the first generation immigrants are called *Issei* (Canadian residents born or raised in Japan), the second *Nisei* (Children of *Issei* who are born and raised in Canada), and the third *Sansei* (Children of *Nisei* who are born and raised in Canada). According to Harris

(1990: 41) this implies that generations play a major role in Japanese Canadian communities. The aforementioned terms will be used throughout this thesis to address the generations.

Dissimilar values and worldviews of the three generations is a common problem within immigrant communities. Adachi (1979: 157) notes that *Nisei* tend to question the values and patterns which are followed by *Issei*, thus creating conflicts. It is also claimed that *Nisei* very often protested against their low status in the society (Adachi 1979: 159). This is also the case in *Obasan*, where Aunt Emily is politically extremely active. Furthermore, she tries to pass on her values to Naomi, however, the latter does not share her views (Harris 1990: 43). Stephen is even more determined to forget his roots. This is supported by Adachi's claim (1979: 362) that *Sansei* tended to abandon their cultural heritage and often saw themselves more as Canadian than Japanese.

Additionally, *Sansei* usually do not speak the language of their ancestors, meaning that the cultural heritage is rapidly fading away (Adachi 1979: 363). Moreover, there is also a major conflict between Obasan and Aunt Emily, which shows how *Issei* and *Nisei* fail to find a common language on how to deal with the past. This conflict is also present between *Sansei* and their ancestors. Therefore, it is suggested that in *Obasan* the conflicts between generations were never resolved. Nevertheless, trying to accept the values of other generations allowed for *Sansei* to make peace with themselves (Harris 1990: 55).

#### **1.4. Silence in the Japanese Culture**

The third generation's identity in *Obasan* is largely shaped by the issue of silence. The conflict between generations has created a situation, where *Issei* has decided to protect *Sansei* by hiding family tragedy. This however, proves to be ineffective, as being silent is often not able to conceal past events, hence making it difficult to make sense of one's identity.

The term 'silence' in Japanese culture differs substantially from the typical Western understanding. Păloşanu (2013: 248) argues, that the Eurocentric understanding of silence is not suitable for the analysis of *Obasan*, and it should not be seen as the opposite of communication. Silence in this context stands for awareness, vigilance, and thoughtfulness. It can be seen as a different kind of speech. However, *Sansei* was born and raised in the Western culture, which means that they were influenced by both the Eurocentric and the Japanese understanding of silence. King-Kok Cheung (1993: 128) explains that *Obasan* shows different approaches to silence and language. Naomi and Stephen have mixed feelings towards silence. *Issei* managed to pass on both traumatic and the positive aspects of silence to the next generation (Cheung 1993: 148). It is also claimed that the novel does not conclude with speech overtaking silence, but rather with an understanding that silence can speak if enough information about the past is available (Cheung 1993: 151-152).

Another important aspect is how the meaning of silence can change depending on the experiences in life. Therefore, it is a rather dynamic term. Different people understand it in unique ways, even within the same generation. Sonia Snelling (1997: 24) argues that when Naomi was molested by her neighbour, silence acquired a new meaning for her. It started to represent painful memories and the hardship during the war. Additionally, it contradicted with the silence, which she acquired from her mother, creating a misunderstanding between the generations. This also serves as a connection between Naomi's childhood and the racist acts of Canadian government (Snelling 1997: 24). The silence is also very much present in Stephen's childhood, causing him to develop self-loathing (Gottlieb 1986: 45). Additionally, the new acquired meaning for silence managed to eventually create an ever-increasing gap between Naomi and her mother (Brandt 1993: 114). This also resulted in Naomi straying away from the Canadian identity.

## 1.5. Trauma

Trauma is the key element in *Obasan*, as it does not allow for *Sansei* to fully develop their identity. Both Naomi and Stephen have to face the loss of parents in their childhood, racism, silence, society's opposition etc. The traumatic experiences that *Sansei* have to put up with, accompany them throughout the novel. Only after the death of Isamu, Naomi and Stephen are able to recollect their memories, including traumatic experiences, and by doing that they can give sense to their past.

It is important to notice that traumatic experiences are rather different from ordinary memories. In fact, it is usually impossible to recall traumatic memories on demand, instead, they reoccur as flashbacks or nightmares, as explained by Cathy Caruth (1995: 151-152). *Sansei* in the novel is indeed haunted by nightmares, for example, they bring back Naomi's memories of sexual molestation in her early childhood (Gottlieb 1986: 44). Furthermore, it is also argued that these nightmares which represent rape are used as a metaphor to show injustice to the Japanese Canadians in general, and therefore, it also applies to Stephen (Gottlieb 1986: 45). People tend to fail to comprehend their resurfacing memories, this is because there is not enough verbal communication (Caruth 1995: 153-154).

Another important aspect from the perspective of trauma is how it is passed on to future generations. Esther Rashkin's study implies that trauma can be silently passed on from parents to their children, which is achieved by behaviour and subtle hints (1999: 435). It is also noted that in order to successfully overcome the trauma, it is necessary to analyse the behaviour of the ancestor, together with the child, even when the parent is no longer alive (Rashkin 1999: 451). Cheung (1993: 143) claims that in *Obasan* traumatic experiences have caused *Sansei* to be silent, and silence in turn is inherited from both *Issei* and *Nisei*. Since silence caused the characters to suffer, they learned to suppress their Japanese identity. Trauma inherited from the previous generations did not allow for *Sansei* to feel safe within the Japanese identity.

## 2. KEY ASPECTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NAOMI'S AND STEPHEN'S IDENTITY

Naomi and Stephen both represent *Sansei*, and they largely grew up together, which could indicate that they identify themselves similarly, but this is not the case. Naomi seems to be more susceptible to being influenced by the Japanese culture, while Stephen makes every effort to rid himself from the Japanese traditions. Naomi and Stephen followed different role models, and they had different experiences in their childhood. Additionally, Stephen was three years older than Naomi, which made him more prone to being negatively influenced by the internment period, as he was able to understand the reality. They were both affected by various traumatic events which led them to develop certain attitudes towards the Japanese and the Canadian identity. *Sansei* in the novel was also influenced by the beliefs of *Issei* and *Nisei*. Furthermore, different perception of silence and its flexibility affected the identity of *Sansei*. By analysing specific events in Naomi's and Stephen's lives it is possible to discover how their identity has developed throughout their lifetime, and which aspects mostly influenced the process. Determining the major influencing factors allows to analyse and understand the process of identity development in the third generation.

### 2.1. Effects of Society's Attitudes on Identity

The way how Canadian society perceives Japanese Canadians affected the development of *Sansei*'s identity. Naomi and Stephen have to put up with racism, prejudice, ignorance, and negativity throughout the novel. The characters' identity is shaped by the acts of the provincial and the federal government, relationship with their neighbours, unimaginably difficult living conditions during the internment and the overall atmosphere, which is present in *Obasan*. Furthermore, as the people of Japanese origin were seen as a threat, they are deprived of their human rights. The characters learn to suppress their

Japanese traditions because they are not valued in the society. They are also not allowed to identify themselves as Canadians, which stimulates *Sansei*'s identity crisis.

The government of Canada took extremely irrational steps to eliminate the potential 'threat' of the Japanese Canadians. The internment, confiscation of property, and not accepting Japanese Canadians as rightful citizens made *Sansei* diverge from their culture. Naomi discovers by reading Aunt Emily's letter to Naomi's mother how the Pearl Harbour bombing made the Canadian government to confiscate cars from the Japanese Canadians, close down Japanese newspapers etc. (Kogawa 1994: 97). The Canadian citizens of Japanese origin were labelled as an enemy without a plausible explanation, which caused distress among them. The policy of Canadian government created unreasonable distrust among white Canadians, which was even passed on to children, for example, Stephen's violin is broken by another child and he comes home crying (Kogawa 1994: 100). Furthermore, the process of internment itself created a trauma to *Sansei*. When the family is forced to move from Slocan to Granton, Alberta, their situation becomes considerably worse, and they have to live in a small hut (Kogawa 1994: 229). As an adult, Naomi starts to have flashbacks of those years of hardship and she is overwhelmed by negative emotions, as she cannot help but to remember the terrible conditions and hardship (Kogawa 1994: 232). It is argued, that at this point Naomi is made to relive her damaged childhood development (Harris 1990: 44). The injustice carried out by the Canadian government and the period of internment caused *Sansei* to take a cautious attitude towards the Japanese identity.

One of the major aspects of the novel, which had a significant impact on how Naomi and Stephen started to perceive the Japanese culture and traditions was the difference in their age during internment period. It can be said that it affected Stephen more than Naomi, because Naomi was a very young child at that time, and was unable to give sense to the events. This becomes apparent already when they are first made to leave their home and

have to take a train to Slocan. Naomi is playing with her toys and is happy, Stephen however, is numb and just keeps staring out of the window. Naomi also tries to elevate Stephen's mood by offering him a sandwich and giving him one of her toys (Kogawa 1994: 136-137). This clearly shows that Naomi did not understand the seriousness of the situation, but Stephen on the other hand, was left numb, as there was no plausible explanation for moving to Slocan. Stephen's maturity can be also seen at Grandma Nakane's funeral. Even though Stephen has difficulty in focusing, he refuses to take a paper from Obasan for drawing, like Naomi does (Kogawa 1994:153). Stephen was able to comprehend the hardship they had to go through and the reasons behind it.

Another aspect which affects how *Sansei* identify themselves are the lies spread by the Canadian press. Idealisation of the poor situation of Japanese Canadians creates alienation from the mainstream Canadian society. This becomes apparent when the family is forced to work at the sugar beet farm. Naomi finds a newspaper clipping from Aunt Emily's package, which portrays the Japanese Canadians working in sugar beet farms. It is titled "Facts about evacuees in Alberta", and claims that the people working in those farms are unexceptionally happy (Kogawa 1994: 231). Furthermore, the clipping states the workers to be "Japanese evacuees" (Kogawa 1994: 231), but many of them were born in Canada. Such labelling shows how *Sansei* had an identity forced upon them. Naomi then instantly remembers how they had to work from morning to night, and were forced to live in terrible conditions (Kogawa 1994: 232-233). Even though the clipping seems to leave a positive impression of the Japanese Canadians, the actual reason is not noble. The press gives a wrong notion to Canadian society, making them not to acknowledge the hardship of the Japanese Canadians. Nyman (2001: 89-90) claims that the reason for this was to demonstrate power and ensure the position of mainstream Canada. This creates loathing against Canadian society, making it difficult for *Sansei* to feel themselves as valued members of the society.

*Sansei*'s identity development is also affected by racism. The Canadians of Japanese origin were deprived of their rights because of their appearance. People of Japanese origin were especially disliked during the Second World War, which makes *Sansei* abandon their Japanese identity in *Obasan*. Both Naomi and Stephen have to put up with racial discrimination in school. Stephen, for example, is bullied and physically assaulted in school due to his origin. He comes home from school with broken glasses, and explains that a girl from his class claimed that all the Japanese children are going to be sent away because they are bad. Stephen then says that both he and Naomi are Japanese. Naomi later asks from her father if that is true, but her father claims that they are Canadian. (Kogawa 1994: 83-84). From that moment on the *Sansei* learns that their Japanese identity is perceived to be negative within the Canadian society. They understand that it is in their own interest to identify themselves as Canadian and not as Japanese. Due to Stephen being directly assaulted because of his ethnicity, racism affects his attitude towards Japanese culture more severely when compared to Naomi. Shoenut (2006: 483) claims that Stephen rejects the Japanese traditions because he is unable to feel himself as an entitled Canadian citizen.

*Obasan* makes it quite evident that stereotyping and certain attitudes prevail in the mind-set of many Canadians for a long period of time. This affects the identity of *Sansei* even in their adulthood. There is an instance in the novel that gives the reader an insight into the problem. People tend to think that Naomi has only recently arrived in Canada and that she is Japanese, but they are surprised to hear that she speaks flawless English. When Naomi goes on a date with a widower father, she is asked, "Where are you from?" Naomi then explains that she was born in Canada and that she is *Sansei*. (Kogawa 1994: 8). The fact that Naomi has to explain strangers quite often that she is a Canadian clearly shows how her true identity is being challenged due to the ignorance of the people surrounding her. The reaction to such a challenge varies among *Sansei*. It can be said that Naomi's strategy is to accept



herself the way she is perceived by other people. It can be speculated that due to Stephen developing more hatred against the Japanese culture, he goes to great lengths to rid himself of his Japanese background, and is very disturbed when he is called a Japanese, because of his childhood memories.

It becomes apparent that the identity development of *Sansei* is affected by the overall pressure and negativity that is present in the society. This makes *Sansei* to feel ashamed for being Japanese. *Sansei* is affected by the fact that Canada does not value its citizens of Japanese origin, which in turn created a situation where the *Sansei* started to stray away from their language and culture. Due to Stephen having more negative events in his experience, where he was despised because of his Japanese roots, he saw Japanese identity more negatively than Naomi and decided to completely abandon his Japanese roots.

## **2.2. Effects of *Sansei*'s Relationship with *Issei* and *Nisei* on Identity**

Different values and beliefs of Japanese immigrant generations in *Obasan* have resulted in a situation where there are certain tensions between the characters. *Issei* follow the Japanese traditions and wish to pass them on to the following generations, neither do they wish to deal with the past. *Nisei* on the other hand, especially Aunt Emily, wish to make the Canadian society to acknowledge the crimes committed against Japanese Canadians. This created a situation, where Naomi and Stephen are lost between two very different worlds.

The mother of Stephen and Naomi had a significant impact on the development of their identity. She resembles an ideal mother, who is very kind and understanding. She teaches her children passion and love. She is also responsible for teaching Naomi the Japanese perception of silence. Nevertheless, it has been argued that Naomi's mother represents cultural values of Canada, and due to Naomi's special and strong relationship with

her mother, she is rather strongly tied to Canada, her mother's land (Shoenut 2006: 485-486). In her adulthood, Naomi still sees her mother as a perfect figure. When she examines her photograph at Obasan's house, she describes her as "a fragile presence", and that her face is "oval as an egg and delicate" (Kogawa 1994: 23). On the other hand, Naomi's perception and memories of her mother are fragmented. When Naomi looks at a picture depicting her and her mother, she states that she can only remember the general outline of that period of time, (Kogawa 1994: 64). This implies that the mother's influence on Naomi's identity was affected by Naomi's inadequate perception of her. The reader is not given an insight into Stephen's thoughts about his mother, but his identity was probably not influenced by his mother as strongly as Naomi's. This is supported by Stephen being closer with his father, and therefore being more influenced by him. Nevertheless, the mother of *Sansei* as a representative of the idyllic period before internment served as a gateway to a positive Canadian identity.

The father had a particularly important role in shaping the identity of *Sansei*. He was in the lives of Naomi and Stephen for a longer period of time than the mother, hence being able to influence *Sansei*'s identity in various ways. Naomi's and Stephen's choices in adulthood were very strongly affected by their time spent with the father. Stephen is especially influenced by the piano and music lessons with his father. Moreover, music becomes a tool for escaping from the Japanese identity. This is supported by the fact that Stephen and his father usually play classical Western music. This bond between them is so important that even when the father is sent to a labour camp, he sends music exercises to Stephen (Kogawa 1994: 124). Additionally, when Stephen grows older and finishes high school, he is praised by a newspaper for his musical skills, and he starts touring all across Europe (Kogawa 1994: 258). This indicates that the legacy of Stephen's father was able to grant Stephen a life as far from the Japanese culture as possible. For example, during his

breaks from tours, he does not feel like at home in Obasan's house, and he even refuses to eat the food (Kogawa 1994: 259). Naomi however, does not have such a bond with her father and therefore does not develop a strong Canadian identity. Nevertheless, the father cares about Naomi's studies and encourages her to be excellent in school. Ultimately, this resulted in Naomi becoming a teacher, as her father had set a good example for her of Canadian values after she had lost her mother.

Naomi and Stephen lost part of their identity when their parents died. The loss of the mother took the safety of Canadian identity away from Naomi. This is illustrated by the incident where Old Man Gower, the molester of Naomi, visits their father. Naomi has a feeling that Gower is stronger than her father, and that her mother could protect her, but she is no longer there (Kogawa 1994: 82). Shoenut (2006: 486) argues that Gower's crime against Naomi is equivalent to the crimes against Japanese Canadian identity by the government. Now that the mother was gone, Naomi's identity became very fragile. Both Naomi and Stephen had difficulties to accept the loss of their mother, which manifests it in certain objects that remind *Sansei* of their parents. Naomi, for example, shows great affection to her doll that her mother gave her before leaving. However, when the doll is lost, she is forced to let go of the doll, and she stops asking for it (Kogawa 1994: 149). Stephen, on the other hand, becomes obsessed with playing his mother's favourite music record (Kogawa 1994: 148). This implies that Naomi and Stephen were desperate for their mother, and the objects helped to remind them of the protection offered by her. The loss of the father had also a significant effect on *Sansei*'s identity. Stephen lost his most important role-model, and he was not able to find a fatherly figure to replace him. Stephen was left by himself, but music helped him to remember his father and it contributed to the development of his Canadian identity. Naomi seems not to come to terms with her father's death. When Naomi is visited by Penny Barker, she almost collapses when stating that her father is dead (Kogawa

1994: 252). The death of *Sansei*'s mother and father resulted in them not being able to have a traditional role-model for the development of their identity.

After the loss of their parents, Naomi and Stephen are raised by *Issei*, mostly Obasan, but also Uncle Sam. This resulted in their identity being largely affected by their conservatism. Due to the loss of her mother, Naomi's identity was more prone to be affected by *Issei*, while Stephen found it impossible to accept their teachings, as he had learned to hate the Japanese culture. Being raised by *Issei*, and having Obasan functioning as a role-model, Naomi learns to value Japanese traditions. Obasan is an extremely loving character, but she does not show her emotions. For example, when Uncle Sam is finally released from the camp and returns home, Obasan greets him with a crispy voice and does not show much affection (Kogawa 1994: 159). In her later life, Naomi shows similar personality traits. She is unable to have deep relations with other people. This also manifests in her identity, as she is unable to make sense of it. She even carries a driver's licence with her, so that she could know who she is (Kogawa 1994: 9). Due to Stephen's negative experiences regarding the Japanese identity, he is not very close with Obasan and avoids anything too Japanese. For example, Stephen does not eat traditional Japanese lunch at school, while Naomi does (Kogawa 1994: 182). Additionally, Uncle Sam is the embodiment of survival for *Sansei*. He makes stone bread, which consists of leftovers or anything available, even including carrots and potatoes (Kogawa 1994: 15). This resembles the harsh period in the life of Japanese Canadians and their sturdiness. Furthermore, Uncle Sam annually visits the coulee with Naomi on the date of Nagasaki bombing, to commemorate Naomi's mother in silence. Davey (1993: 106-107) argues, that it shows the methods how *Issei* healed from trauma, as opposed to *Nisei* (Aunt Emily). *Sansei* unconsciously inherited this method to grieve their mother. Obasan and Uncle Sam provided *Sansei* with an insight into the Japanese worldview, but due to other influences of society and *Nisei*, it proved to be impossible to fully accept.

Nevertheless, *Nisei*, especially Aunt Emily influenced the development of Naomi's and Stephen's identity in some aspects. She attempts to introduce Canadian values and tries to offer an alternative to the views of *Issei*. Aunt Emily is extremely concerned about the internment of Japanese Canadians. She is politically very active and does everything in her power to expose the wrongdoings of the Canadian government. She has a very strong Canadian identity and wishes to pass it on to *Sansei*. However, her impact on Naomi on Stephen was limited, because they were rarely able to make contact with her. Naomi has difficulty in accepting her understanding of the importance of the past, especially before the death of Uncle Sam. This becomes clear when Naomi recalls Aunt Emily's visit to Granton. Aunt Emily has just come from a conference and tells Naomi, Uncle Sam, and Obasan about the internment, and how important it is to remember the injustice. Naomi however, thinks that they should be only concerned about the present day issues, and leave the "dead to bury the dead" (Kogawa 1994: 50). At the same, time Obasan and Uncle Sam express gratitude to Canada, and Naomi agrees with them (Kogawa 1994: 50-51). Naomi has this attitude for her whole life, making it clear, that *Issei* is her main role model. Harris (1990: 54-55) argues that even though recalling the past and trying to make sense of her identity, Naomi still doubts Aunt Emily's methods. Stephen shows more affection towards Emily. This is largely the result of him condemning the values of *Issei* and making every effort to differ from them. When Naomi and Stephen learn that Aunt Emily is going to visit them, Naomi asks from Stephen, what she is like. Stephen responds by pointing at Obasan and Uncle Sam in a picture, and saying that "she's not like them". (Kogawa 1994: 259). This shows that Stephen finds Emily's views reasonable, but it is difficult to tell if he approves digging into the past. Nevertheless, *Nisei's* influence on *Sansei* was not as strong as *Issei's*, due to Naomi and Stephen being raised by Obasan and Uncle Sam.

It becomes clear that Naomi and Stephen's identity was affected by various people. Their impact depended on how much time they were able to spend with *Sansei*. Naomi was more affected by her Mother and Obasan, who were both *Issei* while Stephen was more affected by his father, who was *Nisei*. This is one of the reasons why Naomi and Stephen's identity is so different from each other. Naomi has difficulty in letting go of the *Issei*'s beliefs, while Stephen condemns them.

### **2.3. Effects of Silence on Sansei's Identity**

The importance of silence in *Obasan* cannot be overstated. It is present throughout the narrative and affects all of the characters. This is one of the main reasons behind the conflict between *Issei* and *Nisei*. Aunt Emily believes that speaking up is the only possible method for improving the situation of Japanese Canadians, while *Issei* Obasan believes that words are often unnecessary. This resulted in a situation where Naomi and Stephen are lost between two very different worlds. On one hand, not addressing tragic events was meant to keep *Sansei* away from the painful truth, but on the other hand, silence amplifies Naomi and Stephen's pain. They learn to succumb to injustice, and their identity becomes fragile.

Silence, being part of the Japanese culture, had a very different meaning for Naomi and Stephen, and it affects the way they see the Japanese identity in their adult life. Naomi was an extraordinarily quiet child. Aunt Emily claims that Naomi never cried as a child and that Naomi was the calmest baby she had ever seen (Kogawa 1994: 68). In the early childhood of Naomi, she understood silence, as something protective. It resembled the connection with her mother and Japanese identity. For example, Naomi recalls an episode from her childhood, where she witnesses a hen killing chicks that her mother and father had just bought. She then runs to her mother to ask for help. The mother comes without saying a single word, as there is no need for words. Naomi says that her mother's eyes are "the eyes

of Japanese motherhood”, and that “they are eyes that protect”. (Kogawa 1994: 70). Furthermore, Naomi constantly compares her mother with Mrs. Sugimoto, who had followed them to the hen. She describes her as the opposite of her mother and sees similarities with the killing hen. (Kogawa 1994: 71). This shows that the relationship between Naomi and her mother was irreplaceable, only she was able to talk without words. Later on, when Naomi speaks about the incident with her mother, she does not feel blamed for the incident, and she feels safe (Kogawa 1994: 72). This implies that the Japanese identity had a strong, positive connotation for Naomi in her early childhood, this however changed due to various traumatic events. Stephen on the other hand, was unable to see silence as something positive at all. This was largely caused by the lack of pleasant experiences in terms of silence.

The meaning of silence can change, due to various experiences, and this affected *Sansei*’s perspective on Japanese identity. For Naomi, the most influential event concerning another perspective of silence, was the episode with Old Man Gower. The instances of abuse were traumatic and life-changing events for Naomi. She still has not made peace with it. Old man Gower is Naomi’s neighbour, who abuses her, which takes the feeling of safety given by her mother away from Naomi. Old Man Gower forbids Naomi to tell her mother about those incidents (Kogawa 1994: 73). Snelling (1997: 24) argues that this introduced a silence that she uses to suppress all the painful and traumatic memories, which she experiences in her later life. When Naomi recalls her neighbour, she also remembers a dream, in which oriental women are tortured by soldiers (Kogawa 1994: 73). It has been argued that this dream represents the wrongdoings of Canadian government against the defenceless Japanese (Gottlieb 1986: 45). The new acquired meaning of silence, which opposes safety and understanding, does not allow for Naomi to take action against the injustice of the Canadian society. Traumatic events are too painful for her to deal with, and she longs for the safe meaning of silence, which her mother taught her, but it is impossible to restore the innocence

of childhood. This is also one of the reasons why she finds it difficult to accept Emily's belief in words. Naomi is unable and forbidden to speak about the past, Stephen never had such an influential and straightforward experience of forced silence, but they both suffer from its traumatising effect.

In her later life, *Sansei* is trying to make sense of her identity, and what meaning does a silence carry for them. According to Naomi's notion, Obasan's silence is the reason why Stephen has escaped from Canada, and he is constantly travelling (Kogawa 1994: 17). Furthermore, Naomi also states that departure is vital for Stephen (Kogawa 1994: 17). While Stephen strays away from the Japanese culture, and in adulthood escapes its grasp completely, Naomi is still haunted by the plurality of silence. It is argued that in the beginning of the novel, Naomi is unable to speak because she has not reconsidered her past (Rose 1988: 219). One of the ground-breaking events for Naomi is meeting Rough Lock Bill. Bill asks Naomi what her name is, but when Naomi does not answer, he then asks her to print her name on the ground. He also tells the story about how Slokan got its name (Kogawa 1994: 171-173). According to Willis (1987: 248), this makes Naomi realise the importance of telling a story, as she learns the power of the word. It becomes clear, that addressing the issues of the past, and reconsidering them is the only way to make sense of one's identity.

One of the biggest influence of silence on *Sansei* involves the fate of their mother. She was horribly disfigured during the Nagasaki bombing and died on an unknown date afterwards. The disfigurement was especially terrible, as she had lost most of her face and was infested with maggots, but she survived (Kogawa 1994: 286). Mania Jones has argued, that this disfigurement also implies to the suppression of Japanese Canadians, as her story is not told (1993: 137). Furthermore, Naomi and Stephen's mother forbids her relatives to tell the children about her fate at all cost (Kogawa 1994: 290). Her wish is indeed followed, as



Naomi and Stephen only learn what happened after the death of Uncle Sam. Nevertheless, silence did not improve their situation, as they were aware that something was terribly wrong in their family history. When Naomi is seventeen, and Aunt Emily makes a visit, she hears at night that Uncle Sam, Obasan, and Emily are whispering about something. She is able to make up the words “Japan” and “Nesan” (older sister), and she hears Emily saying: “But they are not children. They should be told” (Kogawa 1994: 263). Moreover, when Naomi is eighteen and goes for a walk to the coulee, Uncle Sam asks how old she is. When he learns the answer he concludes that Naomi is still too young (Kogawa 1994: 3). Neither is Stephen told the fate of his mother, even though he is older, and makes contact with Aunt Emily, who for some reason decided to keep the secret. Indeed, Naomi and Stephen are not children anymore, but the silence prevails for more than a decade. The hidden suffering is in Naomi’s subconscious, she can only make sense of it after knowing the truth. When she does, she has an imaginary dialogue with her deceased mother. She conjured up the image of her mother’s suffering and asks: “Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there” (Kogawa 1994: 290). She also realises: “Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences” (Kogawa 1994: 291). Shirley Geok-lin Lim suggests that such a conversation could only happen after Naomi learns the truth and is an adult (1990: 306-307). Naomi is able to make peace with herself, she understands the reasons behind her suffering and the negative connotation of Japanese identity. It remains unknown if Stephen is able to make peace with himself.

In conclusion, Naomi and Stephen’s understanding of silence differs vastly. Silence is present throughout Stephen’s and Naomi’s childhood. They learn to suppress their suffering. Naomi has positive memories of silence from very early childhood. This has given the Japanese identity a positive connotation for her. Nevertheless, silence does not allow her to live a happy life. She is traumatised by her past experiences and is unable to reconsider them. At the same time, Stephen loathes silence and tries to escape from it. Due to the traumatising effects of silence, *Sansei* have difficulty in identifying themselves.

## CONCLUSION

The question of identity is especially prevalent in immigrant communities. Different immigrant generations have distinctive identities, and these are affected by numerous aspects, as the literature review has demonstrated. Depending on the original homeland, cultural differences with the new homeland can result in misunderstandings. Since *Obasan* concentrates on the experience of Japanese Canadians, there is a constant conflict between the two very different cultural spaces. The third generation Japanese Canadians are still being affected by Japanese values, but at the same time mostly identify themselves as Canadians. In *Obasan*, the most important aspects that influence the identity of the third generation are relations with the previous generations, the peculiarities of Japanese culture, as well as racism, internment, and traumatic experiences. The in-depth analysis of *Obasan* in the empirical part of the thesis has enabled it to understand the problematic nature of *Sansei*'s identity.

Prejudice, racism, and internment did not allow *Sansei* to see Japanese identity from a positive perspective. They wanted to identify themselves as Canadian, but the surrounding people did not accept them to become a part of Canadian society. The internment period managed to raise the question, why Japanese Canadians are frowned upon for no reason. This was devastating for *Sansei*'s identity. Moreover, Naomi and Stephen had different experiences in their childhood. Stephen experienced more racism, which consequently made him reject his Japanese roots. Naomi did not cease to see some positive aspects of Japanese identity and traditions. This shows how one's surroundings directly affect their sense of identity. The Canadian government and society took away *Sansei*'s positive identity, and at the same time rejected them.

Naomi and Stephen were affected by both the first and the second generation Japanese Canadians. Naomi and Stephen's father and Aunt Emily made it clear that they are

Canadians, but Obasan, Uncle Sam, and the mother tended to put stress on their Japanese roots. Due to their parents being no longer able to raise them when they are still small children, Obasan and Uncle Sam assume the responsibility. This results in an untraditional situation, where *Sansei* is largely affected by the values of *Issei*. Consequently, Naomi and Stephen are lost between two cultures. On one hand, they wish to speak up, but they have been taught not to. They are not allowed to deal with the traumatic events which they had to endure. Naomi remains especially silent, while Stephen tries to escape it. Only after reconsidering the past is Naomi able to make sense of her identity and the reasons behind her suffering. She is ready for a fresh start. Stephen, however, has always been Canadian, and he keeps rejecting anything excessively Japanese.

It has become clear that Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* has not lost its relevance. Naomi and Stephen's identity crisis serves as a prime example for analysing and making sense of the multifaceted theme of identity. The problems of identity will never cease to exist, and only by exploring the issues regarding the topic, is it possible to bring clarity to the development of one's identity.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Oliver Lambrik**

**Identity Issues in the Third Generation of Japanese Canadians in Joy Kogawa's Novel *Obasan***

**Kolmanda põlvkonna Kanada jaapanlaste identiteediprobleemid Joy Kogawa romaanis "Obasan"**

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva uurimistöö eesmärk on mõista, mis on identiteedi kujunemise peamised põhjused ning miks sama generatsiooni esindajate identiteet võib olla erinev. Analüüsides Joy Kogawa romaani "Obasan" on võimalik välja tuua kolmanda põlvkonna identiteediprobleemid ning identiteeti kujundavad faktorid.

Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist (kirjandusülevaade ning empiiriline osa) ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatus räägib uurimistöö olulisusest, uurimisküsimustest ning sisaldab ka romaani lühikokkuvõtet.

Esimene peatükk on kirjandusülevaade ehk uurimistöö teoreetiline osa. See keskendub tausta avamisele, et mõista probleemi olemust. See sisaldab Kanada jaapanlaste ajaloo lühiülevaadet, ning käsitleb Kanada ühiskonna väärtushinnanguid, põlvkondadevaheliste konfliktide problemaatikat, vaikuse problemaatikat Jaapani kultuuriruumis ning traumaatiliste kogemuste mehhanismi.

Teine peatükk on uurimistöö empiiriline osa. See analüüsib kolmanda põlvkonna Kanada jaapanlastest tegelasi romaanis. Keskendutud on tegelaskujude kogemustele, mis on mõjutanud nende identiteedi kujunemist. See hõlmab endas rassismi ja interneerimise mõju, vanemate põlvkondade mõju ning vaikuse rolli analüüsi Kanada jaapanlaste kolmanda põlvkonna identiteedi kujunemise seisukohast.

Uurimistöös selgub, et kolmanda põlvkonna Kanada jaapanlased identifitseerivad ennast erinevalt, kuigi tegemist on õe ja vennaga. Naomi aktsepteerib Jaapani kultuuri rohkem kui Stephen. Selle põhjuseks on erinevad kogemused lapsepõlves ning ka vanusevahe. Stephen on rohkem mõjutatud rassismist ning seetõttu tekib temas viha Jaapani identiteedi vastu. Perekonnasisene katastroof jättis mõlemasse lapsesse tugeva jälje, ning pealesurutud vaikus, ei lasknud neil sellega tegeleda.

Märksõnad: Kanada jaapanlased, identiteet, kolmas põlvkond, trauma, vaikus, põlvkondadevahelised suhted.

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